

The Way of the Mindful Warrior: Using Mindfulness to Calm Anxiety

#WellbeingWarriors

Compiled by Tobias van den Bergh
(Student Counselling & Development)

Quote by Jon Kabat-Zinn: "Mindfulness is a way of befriending ourselves and our experiences."

Anxiety is an emotional state that happens in both our minds and in our bodies.

In our minds, anxiety often presents as worry about the future. This can include, What if... thinking ("What if I fail?"); predictions or fortune-telling ("I am going to fail."); and catastrophizing ("If I fail, I won't get my degree, which means I won't ever get a job, and no one would want to marry me, which means I will always be alone and lonely").

Physiologically, anxiety can be experienced in various ways such as tension (tightness in your shoulders or abdominal areas); feeling on edge; sweaty palms; a racing heart; feeling nauseous; shortness of breath; a reduced or increased appetite; and difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much.

Below are three ways in which you can use 'Mindfulness' to reduce your anxiety and stress.

3 STEPS TO USING MINDFULNESS TO REDUCE ANXIETY OR ITS NEGATIVE EFFECTS

1. Healthy body, healthy mind

Your mind is powerful and can influence your body, just as your physical state can impact your mind. If you help your body, you can better help your mind, which is why regular exercise (150 min per week), healthy nutritious food (reduce sugar, alcohol, caffeine), and quality sleep (7 – 8 hours per night) is essential.

Mindfulness is an excellent way of connecting to our bodies. Try this [guided meditation](#) for body and mind.

2. Focus your mind and attention on the only moment we ever have: the present

Close your eyes and take a few deep, cleansing breaths. Notice the rise and fall of your chest as you breathe. Focus your attention on the air as it moves in and out through your body. When your attention is anchored by noticing the flow of your breathing, you can slowly widen your awareness. You may expand your attention to sounds in your environment. Notice sounds that are close by and sounds that might be further away. Then, you may shift your focus to the different sensations you feel in your body.

Conduct a brief [body scan](#) - starting at the top of your head, notice any sensations in your body as you slowly move down all the way to your toes. Do this while you hold an awareness of the act of breathing. When you notice that your mind is wandering, non-judgementally acknowledge that your mind is drifting somewhere else and gently guide your attention back to your breathing.

3. Practice mindfulness and compassion: Let it RAIN

The well-known mindfulness teacher, Tara Brach, proposes the RAIN approach to mindful meditation when struggling with difficult emotions or situations. RAIN is an acronym for: Recognize, Allow, Investigate, and Nurture. When meditating (as in step 2 above) you may experience difficult thoughts or feelings, especially when your mind wanders and you become identified with the feeling or thought.

When you notice this, apply RAIN. Recognize the feeling or thought (e.g. “This is a thought about the future, about me failing a test, and it is difficult.”). Make room for the experience and allow it to be, just as it is. The poet Rumi said: “Don’t turn away. Keep your gaze on the bandaged place. That’s where the light enters you.” Investigate your experience with the curiosity and openness of a child. Where do you feel this thought or feeling in your body? Are there times you notice it visiting you more often than others? Investigate how your mind responds to this experience? Finally, nurture yourself. Acknowledge that this is difficult. Give yourself some kind and compassionate words.

Kristin Neff, an international promoter of self-compassion, suggests a compassionate mantra for difficult moments. You may repeat the mantra below to yourself, whilst placing your hand on your heart. If you are religious, you may recite a special verse from the Bible or a favourite quote. It really does not matter. What matters is that it provides you with a sense of hope, support, compassion, and love.

The mantra is: This is a moment of suffering, suffering is part of life. May I give myself the love and kindness I need right now. May I open my heart and give myself the care I need.

If you would like to download and use some free guided meditations by Tara Brach, please [click here](#). Remember, we all sometimes struggle with anxiety or worry. It is part of being human. What makes the difference is how we respond to it. There are many things we cannot control and many things we can. As the Serenity prayer states: “God, give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; And the wisdom to know the difference.

Please remember that these approaches are not magical solutions and will not necessarily work for everyone in all circumstances. If you, or anyone you know, struggles with severe anxiety or mental health challenges, please reach out to trained mental health professionals. You may also use or share these toll-free numbers:

- South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) Suicide Crisis Line: 0800 567 567
- Adcock Ingram Depression and Anxiety Helpline: 0800 70 80 90
- Cipla Whatsapp Chat Line: 076 882 2775